

Gregory of Nyssa

THE LIFE OF MOSES

TRANSLATION, INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

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PREFACE

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trines and to the doctrines of the fathers will find himself between two antagonists.¹⁹ For the foreigner in worship is opposed to the Hebrew teaching, and contentiously strives to appear stronger than the Israelite. And so he seems to be to many of the more superficial who abandon the faith of their fathers and fight on the side of the enemy, becoming transgressors of the fathers' teaching. On the other hand, he who is great and noble in soul like Moses slays with his own hand the one who rises in opposition to true religion.²⁰

14. One may, moreover, find this same conflict in us, for man is set before competitors as the prize of their contest. He makes the one with whom he sides the victor over the other.²¹ The fight of the Egyptian against the Hebrew is like the fight of idolatry against true religion, of licentiousness against self-control, of injustice against righteousness, of arrogance against humility, and of everything against what is perceived by its opposite.²²

15. Moses teaches us by his own example to take our stand with virtue as with a kinsman and to kill virtue's adversary. The victory of true religion is the death and destruction of idolatry. So also injustice is killed by righteousness and arrogance is slain by humility.

16. The dispute of the two Israelites with each other occurs also in us. There would be no occasion for wicked, heretical opinions to arise unless erroneous reasonings withstood the truth. If, therefore, we by ourselves are too weak to give the victory to what is righteous, since the bad is stronger in its attacks and rejects the rule of truth, we must flee as quickly as possible (in accordance with the historical example) from the conflict to the greater and higher teaching of the mysteries.

17. And if we must again live with a foreigner, that is to say, if need requires us to associate with profane wisdom, let us with determination scatter the wicked shepherds from their unjust use of the wells—which means let us reprove the teach-

ers of evil for their wicked use of instruction.

18. In the same way we shall live a solitary life,²³ no longer entangled with adversaries or mediating between them, but we shall live among those of like disposition and mind who are fed by us while all the movements of our soul are shepherded, like sheep,²⁴ by the will of guiding reason.²⁵

The Burning Bush

19. It is upon us who continue in this quiet and peaceful course of life that the truth will shine, illuminating the eyes of our soul with its own rays. This truth, which was then manifested by the ineffable and mysterious illumination which came to Moses, is God.

20. And if the flame by which the soul of the prophet was illuminated was kindled from a thorny bush, even this fact will not be useless for our inquiry.²⁶ For if truth is God and truth is light—the Gospel testifies by these sublime and divine names to the God who made himself visible to us in the flesh²⁷—such guidance of virtue leads us to know that light which has reached down even to human nature. Lest one think that the radiance did not come from a material substance, this light did not shine from some luminary among the stars but came from an earthly bush and surpassed the heavenly luminaries in brilliance.

21. From this we learn also the mystery of the Virgin: The light of divinity which through birth shone from her into human life did not consume the burning bush, even as the flower of her virginity was not withered by giving birth.²⁸

22. That light teaches us what we must do to stand within the rays of the true light: Sandaled feet cannot ascend that height where the light of truth is seen, but the dead and earthly covering of skins, which was placed around our nature at the beginning when we were found naked because of disobedience to the divine will, must be removed from the feet of the soul.²⁹

When we do this, the knowledge of the truth³⁰ will result and manifest itself.³¹ The full knowledge of being comes about by purifying our opinion concerning nonbeing.

23. In my view the definition of truth is this: not to have a mistaken apprehension of Being. Falsehood is a kind of impression which arises in the understanding about nonbeing: as though what does not exist does, in fact, exist. But truth is the sure apprehension of real Being.³² So, whoever applies himself in quietness to higher philosophical matters over a long period of time will barely apprehend what true Being is, that is, what possesses existence in its own nature,³³ and what nonbeing is, that is, what is existence only in appearance, with no self-subsisting nature.³⁴

24. It seems to me that at the time the great Moses was instructed in the theophany he came to know that none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsists, but that the transcendent essence and cause of the universe, on which everything depends, alone subsists.³⁵

25. For even if the understanding looks upon any other existing things, reason observes in absolutely none of them the self-sufficiency by which they could exist without participating in true Being.³⁶ On the other hand, that which is always the same, neither increasing nor diminishing, immutable to all change whether to better or to worse (for it is far removed from the inferior and it has no superior), standing in need of nothing else, alone desirable, participated in by all but not lessened by their participation—this is truly real Being. And the apprehension of it is the knowledge of truth.³⁷

26. In the same way that Moses on that occasion attained to this knowledge, so now does everyone who, like him, divests himself of the earthly covering and looks to the light shining from the bramble bush,³⁸ that is, to the Radiance which shines upon us through this thorny flesh and which is (as the Gospel says) the true light and the truth itself.³⁹ A person like this

becomes able to help others to salvation, to destroy the tyranny which holds power wickedly, and to deliver to freedom everyone held in evil servitude.⁴⁰

The transformation of the right hand and the rod's changing into a snake became the first of the miracles.

27. These seem to me to signify in a figure the mystery of the Lord's incarnation, a manifestation of deity to men which effects the death of the tyrant and sets free those under his power.⁴¹

28. What leads me to this understanding is the testimony of the Prophets and the Gospel. The Prophet declares: *This is the change of the right hand of the most High*,⁴² indicating that, although the divine nature is contemplated in its immutability, by condescension to the weakness of human nature it was changed to our shape and form.

29. When the hand of the lawgiver was extended from his bosom it was changed to an unnatural complexion, and when placed again in his bosom, it returned to its own natural beauty. Again, *the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father*⁴³ *is he who is the right hand of the most High*.⁴⁴

30. When he was manifested to us from the bosom of the Father, he was changed to be like us. After he wiped away our infirmities, he again returned to his own bosom the hand which had been among us and had received our complexion. (The Father is the bosom of the right hand.) What is impassible by nature did not change into what is passible, but what is mutable and subject to passions was transformed into impassibility through its participation in the immutable.⁴⁵

31. The change from a rod into a snake should not trouble the lovers of Christ—as if we were adapting the doctrine of the incarnation to an unsuitable animal.⁴⁶ For the Truth himself through the voice of the Gospel does not refuse a comparison like this in saying: *And the Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert*.⁴⁷

32. The teaching is clear. For if the father of sin is called a

weak to strike the disobedient ear. Therefore the Jews' deaf ears did not receive the sound of the trumpets. As the trumpets came closer, according to the text, they became louder. The last sounds, which came through the preaching of the Gospels, struck their ears, since the Spirit through his instruments sounds a noise more loudly ringing and makes a sound more vibrant in each succeeding spokesman. The instruments which ring out the Spirit's sound would be the Prophets and Apostles whose *voice*,¹⁸⁶ as the Psalter says, *goes out through all the earth: and their message to the ends of the world.*¹⁸⁷

160. The multitude was not capable of hearing the voice from above but relied on Moses to learn by himself the secrets and to teach the people whatever doctrine he might learn through instruction from above. This is also true of the arrangement in the Church: Not all thrust themselves toward the apprehension of the mysteries, but, choosing from among themselves¹⁸⁸ someone who is able to hear things divine, they give ear gratefully to him, considering trustworthy whatever they might hear from someone initiated into the divine mysteries.

161. It is said, *Not all are apostles, nor all prophets*,¹⁸⁹ but this is not now heeded in many of the churches. For many, still in need of being purified from the way they have lived, unwashed and full of spots in their life's garment and protecting themselves only with their irrational senses, make an assault on the divine mountain. So it happens that they are stoned by their own reasonings, for heretical opinions are in effect stones which crush the inventor of evil doctrines.¹⁹⁰

The Darkness

162. What does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God in it?¹⁹¹ What is now recounted seems somehow to be contradictory to the first theophany, for then

the Divine was beheld in light but now he is seen in darkness.¹⁹² Let us not think that this is at variance with the sequence of things we have contemplated spiritually. Scripture teaches by this that religious knowledge comes at first to those who receive it as light. Therefore what is perceived to be contrary to religion is darkness, and the escape from darkness comes about when one participates in light. But as the mind progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature¹⁹³ is un contemplated.

163. For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees,¹⁹⁴ it keeps on penetrating deeper¹⁹⁵ until by the intelligence's yearning¹⁹⁶ for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing,¹⁹⁷ because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness,¹⁹⁸ says, *No one has ever seen God*,¹⁹⁹ thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature.²⁰⁰

164. When, therefore, Moses grew in knowledge, he declared that he had seen God in the darkness, that is, that he had then come to know that what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension, for the text says, *Moses approached the dark cloud where God was.*²⁰¹ What God? He who *made darkness his biding place*,²⁰² as David says, who also was initiated into the mysteries in the same inner sanctuary.²⁰³

165. When Moses arrived there, he was taught by word what he had formerly learned from darkness, so that, I think, the doctrine on this matter might be made firmer for us for being testified to by the divine voice. The divine word at the

beginning forbids that the Divine be likened to any of the things known by men,²⁰⁴ since every concept which comes from some comprehensible image²⁰⁵ by an approximate understanding and by guessing at the divine nature constitutes an idol of God and does not proclaim God.

166. Religious virtue is divided into two parts, into that which pertains to the Divine and that which pertains to right conduct (for purity of life is a part of religion).²⁰⁶ Moses learns at first the things which must be known about God (namely, that none of those things known by human comprehension is to be ascribed to him). Then he is taught the other side of virtue, learning by what pursuits the virtuous life is perfected.

167. After this he comes to the tabernacle not made with hands. Who will follow someone who makes his way through such places and elevates his mind to such heights, who, as though he were passing from one peak to another, comes ever higher than he was through his ascent to the heights? First, he leaves behind the base of the mountain and is separated from all those too weak for the ascent. Then as he rises higher in his ascent he hears the sounds of the trumpets. Thereupon, he slips into the inner sanctuary of divine knowledge. And he does not remain there, but he passes on to the tabernacle not made with hands.²⁰⁷ For truly this is the limit that someone reaches who is elevated through such ascents.

168. For it seems to me that in another sense the heavenly trumpet becomes a teacher to the one ascending as he makes his way to what is not made with hands. For the wonderful harmony of the heavens proclaims the wisdom which shines forth in the creation and sets forth the great glory of God through the things which are seen, in keeping with the statement, *the heavens declare the glory of God*.²⁰⁸ It becomes the loud sounding trumpet of clear and melodious teaching, as one of the Prophets says, *The heavens trumpeted from above*.²⁰⁹

169. When he who has been purified and is sharp of hearing in his heart hears this sound (I am speaking of the

knowledge of the divine power which comes from the contemplation of reality), he is led by it to the place where his intelligence lets him slip in where God is. This is called *darkness* by the Scripture,²¹⁰ which signifies, as I said, the unknown and unseen. When he arrives there, he sees that tabernacle not made with hands, which he shows to those below by means of a material likeness.²¹¹

The Heavenly Tabernacle

170. What then is that tabernacle not made with hands which was shown to Moses on the mountain and to which he was commanded to look as to an archetype so that he might reproduce in a handmade structure that marvel not made with hands?²¹² God says, *See that you make them according to the pattern shown you on the mountain*.²¹³ There were gold pillars supported by silver bases and decorated with similar silver capitals; then, there were other pillars whose capitals and bases were of bronze but whose shafts were of silver. The core of all the pillars was wood that does not rot.²¹⁴ But all around shone the brightness of these precious metals.

171. Likewise, there was an ark made of wood that does not rot, overlaid with gleaming pure gold. In addition, there was a candlestick with a single base, divided at its top into seven branches, each supporting a lamp. The candlestick was made of solid gold and not of wood overlaid with gold. There was, moreover, an altar and the throne of mercy and the so-called cherubim whose wings overshadowed the ark.²¹⁵ All these were gold, not merely presenting a superficial appearance of gold but gold through and through.

172. Furthermore, there were curtains artistically woven of diverse colors; these brilliant colors were woven together to make a beautiful fabric. The curtains divided the tabernacle into two parts: the one visible and accessible to certain of the

priests and the other secret and inaccessible. The name of the front part was the Holy Place and that of the hidden part was the Holy of Holies. In addition, there were lavers and braziers and hangings around the outer court and the curtains of hair and skins dyed red and all the other things he describes in the text. What words could accurately describe it all?

173. Of what things not made with hands are these an imitation? And what benefit does the material imitation of those things Moses saw there convey to those who look at it? It seems good to me to leave the precise meaning of these things to those who have by the Spirit the power to search *the depths of God*,²¹⁶ to someone who may be able, as the Apostle says, *in the Spirit to speak about mysterious things*.²¹⁷ We shall leave what we say conjecturally and by supposition on the thought at hand to the judgment of our readers. Their critical intelligence must decide whether it should be rejected or accepted.

174. Taking a hint from what has been said by Paul, who partially uncovered the mystery of these things, we say that Moses was earlier instructed by a type in the mystery of the tabernacle which encompasses the universe. This tabernacle would be *Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God*,²¹⁸ who in his own nature was not made with hands, yet capable of being made when it became necessary for this tabernacle to be erected among us. Thus, the same tabernacle is in a way both unfashioned and fashioned, uncreated in preexistence but created in having received this material composition.²¹⁹

175. What we say is of course not obscure to those who have accurately received the mystery of our faith. For there is one thing out of all others which both existed before the ages and came into being at the end of the ages.²²⁰ It did not need a temporal beginning (for how could what was before all times and ages be in need of a temporal origin?), but for our sakes, who had lost our existence through our thoughtlessness, it consented to be born like us so that it might bring that which had left reality back again to reality. This one is the Only

Begotten God, who encompasses everything in himself but who also pitched his own tabernacle among us.²²¹

176. But if we name such a God "tabernacle," the person who loves Christ should not be disturbed at all on the grounds that the suggestion involved in the phrase diminishes the magnificence of the nature of God. For neither is any other name worthy of the nature thus signified, but all names have equally fallen short of accurate description, both those recognized as insignificant as well as those by which some great insight is indicated.²²²

177. But just as all the other names, in keeping with what is being specified, are each used piously to express the divine power—as, for example, physician, shepherd, protector, bread, vine, way, door, mansion, water, rock, spring, and whatever other designations are used of him—in the same way he is given the predicate "tabernacle" in accord with a signification fitting to God.²²³ For the power which encompasses the universe, in which *lives the fulness of divinity*,²²⁴ the common protector of all, who encompasses everything within himself, is rightly called "tabernacle."

178. The vision must correspond to the name "tabernacle,"²²⁵ so that each thing seen leads to the contemplation of a concept appropriate to God. Now the great Apostle says that the curtain of the lower tabernacle is the flesh of Christ,²²⁶ I think, because it is composed of various colors, of the four elements.²²⁷ Doubtless he himself had a vision of the tabernacle when he entered the supercelestial sanctuary where the mysteries of Paradise were revealed to him by the Spirit.²²⁸ It would be well then by paying heed to the partial interpretation, to fit the total contemplation of the tabernacle to it.

179. We can gain clarity about the figures pertaining to the tabernacle from the very words of the Apostle. For he says somewhere with reference to the Only Begotten, whom we have perceived in place of the tabernacle, that *in him were created all things, everything visible and everything invisible, Thrones, Dom-*

removed from their ears the earring of the commandment. Therefore, he who kills such brothers and friends and neighbors will hear from the Law that statement which the history says Moses spoke to those who killed them: *Today you have won yourselves investiture as priests of Yahweh at the cost, one of his son, another of his brother; and so he grants you a blessing today.*²⁸³

214. I think it is time to call attention to those who gave themselves over to sin. Thus we may learn how the tables inscribed by God with the divine Law, which fell from Moses' hands to the ground and were broken by the impact, were restored again by Moses. The tables were not wholly the same, only the writing on them was the same. Having made the tables out of earthly matter, Moses submitted them to the power of the One who would engrave his Law upon them. In this way, while he carried the Law in letters of stone, he restored grace inasmuch as God himself had impressed the words on the stone.

215. For perhaps it is possible, as we are led by these events, to come to some perception of the divine concern for us. For if the divine Apostle speaks the truth when he calls the tables "hearts,"²⁸⁴ that is, the foremost part of the soul (and certainly he who *by the Spirit . . . reaches . . . the depths of God*²⁸⁵ does speak the truth), then it is possible to learn from this that human nature at its beginning was unbroken and immortal. Since human nature was fashioned by the divine hands and beautified with the unwritten characters of the Law, the intention of the Law lay in our nature in turning us away from evil and in honoring the divine.²⁸⁶

216. When the sound of sin struck our ears, that sound which the first book of Scripture calls the "voice of the serpent,"²⁸⁷ but the history concerning the tables calls the "voice of drunken singing,"²⁸⁸ the tables fell to the earth and were broken. But again the true Lawgiver, of whom Moses was a type, cut the tables of human nature for himself from our earth. It was not marriage which produced for him his "God-

receiving"²⁸⁹ flesh, but he became the stonecutter of his own flesh, which was carved by the divine finger, for *the Holy Spirit came upon the virgin and the power of the Most High overshadowed her.*²⁹⁰ When this took place, our nature regained its unbroken character, becoming immortal through the letters written by his finger. The Holy Spirit is called "finger" in many places by Scripture.²⁹¹

217. Moses was transformed to such a degree of glory that the mortal eye could not behold him.²⁹² Certainly he who has been instructed in the divine mystery of our faith knows how the contemplation of the spiritual sense agrees with the literal account. For when the restorer of our broken nature (you no doubt perceive in him the one who healed our brokenness) had restored the broken table of our nature to its original beauty—doing this by the finger of God, as I said—the eyes of the unworthy could no longer behold him. In his surpassing glory he becomes inaccessible to these who would look upon him.

218. For in truth, as the Gospel says, *when he shall come in his glory escorted by all the angels,*²⁹³ he is scarcely bearable and visible to the righteous. He who is impious and follows the Judaizing heresy²⁹⁴ remains without a share in that vision, for let the impious be removed, as Isaiah says, and *he shall not see the glory of the Lord.*²⁹⁵

Eternal Progress²⁹⁶

219. While following these things in the sequence of our investigation, we were led to a deeper meaning in contemplating this passage.²⁹⁷ Let us return to the subject. How does someone who Scripture says saw God clearly in such divine appearances—*face to face, as a man speaks with his friend*²⁹⁸—require that God appear to him, as though he who is always visible had not yet been seen, as though Moses had not yet